



Taking the Road of the Incarnation

My sister, my brother in the Family of the Incarnation,

Before sharing my experience with you, I invite you to listen to the encouragements of our Father Louis-Marie to his religious sisters: “Several had begun a journey that had to be done at night, on a path full of stones, similar to flint-like rocks, almost all with five points. They had tried; but after three or four steps, they turned back. They asked me for another path.

– ‘I don’t know any other,’ I told them.

– ‘At least obtain for us to travel by day.’

– ‘That is not possible: it is never daylight on this path; the sun never shines there; but from time to time you will see little stars; you will find some old men who will have a small lamp in a lantern; it was given to them because of their old age; but they have been walking barefoot on this path for many years.’

– ‘What?’, some asked, ‘So it’s not a journey you can complete in a year?’

– ‘We don’t count the months or the years,’ I replied; ‘all I know is that those who do not get discouraged always reach the goal.’”

(cf. letter of March 18, 1820, *Writings of LMB*, Vol. 3, p. 201)

Fr. Baudouin loved sending his sisters short, image-rich texts to convey a message. The date of this letter, March 18, 1820, leads us to think it is linked to the feast of March 25th, the Feast of the Annunciation, which was always dear to Fr. Baudouin’s heart. He simply called it: “*It’s THE Feast!*”, and also, “*The Feast of the Incarnation!*”

For him, this March 25th feast was a personal and intimate celebration: the Feast *of Jesus’ Friendship for him*. He lived this friendship at every moment and in all his occupations. He passed on this spirituality to his religious men and women because he saw in the Incarnation a path to live in union with God in the example of Jesus.

In this letter, the Father clearly explains that to enter into Jesus’ friendship, we need time, perseverance, and courage. This letter reminds me of a West African proverb: “*The one who drinks from the chief’s calabash is the one who has sat beside the chief for a long time.*”

Yes, to become a friend of Jesus, we need time, perseverance, and courage.

To open our small jubilee marking 20 years of the Family of the Incarnation, the Core Team offers you in this first letter a brief presentation of the spirituality of the Incarnation.

To enter into this spirituality, I will first explain what we mean by the expression “*spirituality of the Incarnation.*” Then we will explore the spiritual journey of Louis-Marie Baudouin. And finally, we will listen to Father Baudouin giving us a few pieces of advice to walk the road of the Incarnation. The Incarnation is truly a road to journey toward Jesus—and through Jesus, to the Father. Today

I – The Spirituality of the Incarnation: The Human Face of Jesus

Fr. Baudouin is our founder, which is why we refer to him. But Fr. Baudouin did not invent our spirituality of the Incarnation. He received it from his *spiritual masters*, St. Vincent de Paul and St. Teresa of Avila. Both were influenced by the Council of Trent, which called the Church to reform itself. As part of this reform, the role of Jesus as **Mediator was better understood**. At the same time, there was a “rediscovery” of Jesus as a man. This led to a change in the prayer life of Catholics. Jesus then took on a central place. Vincent de Paul and Teresa of Avila recognized in Jesus of Nazareth both their Master and an elder brother. Their spiritual lives were completely renewed by this experience. Vincent and Teresa passed on their experience to their disciples. Fr. Baudouin leads his own disciples in the same spirit:

- “*Piety must always tend toward union with Jesus, and Jesus unites us with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.*” (To his nephew, January 1, 1818)
- “*Let us go to Jesus in order to go to the Father.*” (To a religious sister, October 24, 1816)
- “*Everything must be done with Jesus for the glory of God. Are you there, my daughter? But it takes time—a long time—and patience.*” (To a religious sister, June 21, 1824)

The spirituality of the Incarnation is not only about a relationship with God. This spirituality seeks to show that the Incarnation continues today. Jesus became man forever, and always to save, to deliver captives, to free the oppressed (cf. Luke 4:16–21). Even today, the Incarnation must continue to be lived because there are still people who are rejected, hungry, suffering from injustice, naked, or imprisoned. These people must be able to encounter Jesus today. The word “Christian” comes from “Christ”; the Christian is another Christ. The spirituality of the Incarnation, for a Christian today, consists of becoming ***the human face of Jesus*** for every other person. To do that, one must become a ***friend of Jesus***.

II – Father Baudouin, Friend of Jesus

How did Father Baudouin become a ***Friend*** of Jesus?

Like every Christian, it was on his mother’s and older sister’s lap that Louis-Marie first learned to speak to Jesus and to pray. Later, in catechism class, he heard about the mystery of the Incarnation: Jesus is true God and true man. What did he understand of this? Likely very little—it must have gone far over his head! Later, in major seminary, he better understood this mystery through the theology his professors taught him. It took several years of formation in the school of the Incarnation. He had to grow in knowledge of Jesus to discover that the Incarnation is both a school and a way of life.

Major seminary was a time of intellectual formation, and also a time of maturation, during which his spiritual life took shape in the school of the Incarnation. Most of his professors were religious of the Congregation of the Mission, founded by St. Vincent de Paul—the Lazarists. These formators trained the seminarians based on what Vincent had handed on to them: a way of ***praying with the heart***, of contemplating Jesus, of living with Jesus. In this school, Louis-Marie discovered the role of Jesus in the life of the baptized. This was his first stage.

The second stage took place during his exile in Spain. He had been ordained a priest on September 19, 1789, in the midst of the Revolution. On September 9, 1792, Louis-Marie was deported to Spain, where

he lived for five years. This period of exile was emotionally painful but spiritually very fruitful; the reading of the writings of Saint Teresa of Avila helped him grow in knowledge and friendship with Jesus. Like Teresa, Louis-Marie was deeply moved by his "*discovery*" of the holy humanity of Jesus, the Son of God. Enlightened by the Holy Spirit, he had the unique experience of "an unshakable adherence to the *'humanity of Christ' that permeated his actions*" (Pope Francis). Jesus then became his intimate friend.

In 1797, at the request of his bishop, Louis-Marie secretly returned to France, landing on August 15, 1797, at Les Sables d'Olonne, a town in his home diocese of Luçon. Thus began the third stage of his life, which was for him a time of **spiritual maturation**. He first lived in hiding for 28 months, sheltered in a house because the political climate was hostile to the Catholic Church. He carried out a bit of ministry, mostly at night, visiting the sick. During the day, he spent long hours reading Holy Scripture and in adoration before the Blessed Sacrament. This time in hiding became for Louis-Marie a period of dialogue with Jesus, a time of long conversations and reflection on the future. In January 1800, Napoleon proclaimed freedom of worship, and priests emerged from hiding to rejoin their parishes.

In April 1800, Louis-Marie joined a parish whose pastor had not yet returned to France, and in 1801, he was appointed parish priest of Chavagnes-en-Paillers by his bishop. It was there that he gathered the first Fathers and founded the Congregation of the Ursuline Sisters.

The first letters to Mother Saint-Benoît, dated from this period (1800/1801), reveal a **generous missionary** bearing beautiful fruit. At the same time, his prayer life expanded. In a letter dated January 8, 1801, he wrote to Mother Saint-Benoît: "*You will adore Jesus as Truth and as the enemy of all lies.*" Three months later, he wrote: "Adore the Incarnate Word sending his apostles from all sides to spread his fire and his light." This was not just a change in phrasing. In the first phrase, he invites her to adore Jesus, enthroned in heaven as the Master of Truth; in the second, he adores Jesus walking with him, on the roads of his parish, proclaiming the Good News.

During these few months of ministry, Father Baudouin adored Jesus, the Incarnate Word, in the territory of his parish and in the hearts of his parishioners. He no longer saw Jesus only in the Blessed Sacrament or in heaven as "*Master of Truth, enemy of all lies,*" but encountered and adored him as the "*Missionary of the Father,*" hidden in the hearts of his parishioners. These first letters of 1801—and even more so, all his correspondence—reveal the **intimate friendship** that united Jesus and Father Baudouin. Jesus and Father Baudouin had become intimate friends: **Father Baudouin did nothing without Jesus.**

III – Listen to Louis-Marie Baudouin: God in First Place

Father Baudouin, through his life, shows us that living according to the spirituality of the Incarnation means ***living and acting as an intimate friend of Jesus, in all circumstances.***

The spirituality of the Incarnation is much more than a spiritual exercise or a form of prayer. It is a way of life, inspired by the Gospel—or better yet, in harmony with the Gospel. For this reason, Louis-Marie Baudouin often invites his disciples to "**seek the will of God.**" One must do the will of the Father, just as Jesus did:

- “Jesus said to his disciples: *My food is to do the will of the one who sent me and to complete his work*” (John 4:34).
- “*Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise.*” (John 5:19).
- “*I have not spoken on my own, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment about what to say and what to speak [...] What I speak, therefore, I speak just as the Father has told me*” (John 12:49-51).

Fr. Baudouin invites his disciple to fix their eyes on Jesus in order to imitate him. One letter makes this invitation clear:

“I am writing to you, my dear daughters, to ask each of you to paint a picture to place in the temple of God. Do it with all the skill you can. Every day, add a few brushstrokes; do not let a day pass without working on it... You will succeed, too, because, as you have just read: ‘My Spirit is in them.’ Let us adorn, my dear daughters, the temple of the Incarnate Word! You all understand me. It is Jesus that I want you to copy this year of grace, 1825, which the good God gives us in his mercy.” (Letter to the novices, January 1, 1825)

He returns to this call to imitation in another letter:

“Let others admire and scorn this or that object. Fix your admiration with the prophet Isaiah. What is it to admire? It is to gaze upon something with wonder and astonishment for its great beauty and extraordinary perfection not seen elsewhere. Admiration is complete when it drives out all other thoughts from the soul, fills the intellect completely, and ravishes the heart and its love.” (Letter of March 21, 1825)

A) – To enter this path, you **must have a true and deep desire to become a friend of Jesus.**

This desire does not come from you—it is the Holy Spirit who stirs it up in your heart. The Holy Spirit awakens in you this longing for friendship with Jesus; he makes this desire grow within you until it becomes a burning thirst in your heart.

But this desire grows only if you are docile to the Holy Spirit. Louis-Marie worked all his life to become docile to the Holy Spirit and asked his disciples to be as well. He gave the example himself. Mother Saint-Benoît had asked him to renew her religious vows.

Fr. Baudouin replied: *“I received your letter... But I am in darkness concerning you. I am waiting for the sun to rise on this matter: the night has lasted since the beginning of Lent last year. May my Mother enlighten and guide me! I’m afraid of being mistaken and of misleading you, and that Satan may be mocking both of us...”* (Letter of January 8, 1801)

The action of the Holy Spirit helps establish us in union with God. This is a great grace that the Spirit gives you. Don’t let it pass by—welcome this grace and ask the Spirit to help you collaborate with his work. To grow this desire, you must follow in the footsteps of Jesus, who prays:

- “*O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.*” (Psalm 63)
- “*Very early, before dawn, Jesus got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. Simon and his companions searched for him; and when they found him, they said, ‘Everyone is looking for you.’*” (Mark 1:35-37)
Also see John 6:25–29.

The soul is united to God in proportion to its faith, hope, and love. Father Baudouin repeats the teaching of Scripture, following in the footsteps of Teresa of Avila.

B) – Let yourself be transformed by the Spirit of Jesus

“It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” (Galatians 2:20)

You probably know this phrase of Paul. With these words, Paul describes the profound upheaval he experienced after encountering Jesus on the road to Damascus (see Acts 9:1–19). From that day on, he lived a new life, described in Ephesians 4:17–5:20. In his letter to the Galatians, he emphasizes the freedom that Christ gave him: *“It is for freedom that Christ has set us free.”* (Galatians 5:1)

It is the Holy Spirit who placed this great desire for friendship with Jesus in your heart. But its fulfillment partly depends on you. It is you who receives this desire, and you who must consent to being transformed by the Spirit. He will lead you along a *path of purification* and make you pass through the narrow gate:

- *“Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction...”* (Matthew 7:13)
- *“Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Whoever loves their life loses it, and whoever hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.”* (John 12:24–26)
- *“I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.”* (Galatians 2:19–20)

In your New Testament, you’ll find other words that call for renunciation, such as: *tear out, cut off, strip away, leave behind, die*. These are strong words, but they all mean the same thing: not “destruction” but **cooperation** with the restoration of Jesus’ image in us through the Holy Spirit. The Spirit’s work leads us to the true freedom of the children of God. He helps us detach from ourselves and from everything that burdens us, so we can go toward God and toward our brothers and sisters—two movements that are inseparable.

In summary, the last few paragraphs can be summed up in three points:

- The goal of self-emptying is **to give God first place**.
- Seeking God means **seeking to do his will**.
- Seeking God means **letting ourselves be led by him**—in love (will), hope (memory), and faith (intelligence); in other words, we must move from *doing for God* to *letting God act in us*.

Luke writes:

“Jesus grew in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and people.” (Luke 2:52)

I wish the same for you: may you grow in wisdom and grace as you walk the path of the Incarnation and deepen your friendship with Jesus.

TO ENCOURAGE GROUP DISCUSSION

This letter will truly benefit you only if it leads to group sharing. It may be necessary to print it and distribute a copy to each member.

Since the next letter will not be sent until December, you have time to reflect on this one, as it is quite long. You could plan to meet two or three times. To help you, here are some reflection questions on Points I and II:

Point I:

- You know our name, *Family of the Incarnation*: but do you know why we chose this name?
- Had you heard the expression "*spirituality of the Incarnation*" before? How did you understand it?
- Did this first point bring you anything new?

Point II:

- What do you think about the spiritual journey of Fr. Baudouin?
- Does his journey awaken in you a desire or a calling?
- Do you know the life of Louis-Marie Baudouin?
- What do you take away from these two points?